

Unopposed Molina's 1989 Campaign: Hike Voter Registration in 1st District

By BILL BOYARSKY,
Times City-County Bureau Chief

Gloria Molina is running against nobody. So the Los Angeles city councilwoman has put her money and effort into registering voters in a poor, predominantly Latino district that has the city's lowest political participation.

Nobody is not a disparaging term directed at nonentity candidates. Literally nobody signed up to run against the confrontation-minded, 5-foot-tall city lawmaker whose blunt, no-compromise style has upset colleagues and the Bradley Administration in her two years on the council.

"Since I'm the only one, I could have just put up lawn signs," Molina said on a recent Saturday at her North Figueroa Street storefront campaign headquarters. "But there are a lot of ineligible voters here, a lot of 18-year-olds, a lot of people becoming citizens."

Coffee, Cookies, Cakes

About 20 people, Anglos and Latinos, were there. Some brought their children. They played, even during her brief talk. Plates of cakes and cookies from a Mexican bakery were laid out on a counter, along with coffee and apple juice.

A map of the 1st District was on the wall, the precinct walkers' guide. Campaign director Kit-Bacon Gressit organized the supporters and chatted with reporters, occasionally checking on her baby, who was alternately sleeping in a stroller and being held by Molina aide Alma Martinez.

The good-humored family feeling was deceptive. In trying to increase voter registration, which ends Monday, Molina was striking at a serious problem in the inner-city district she has represented since May, 1987. For the future, Molina's name comes up as a possible candidate for mayor. But this year, her sights are on her home base.

Lack of political power has been the story of this area, home of upwardly striving professionals on Mt. Washington, affluent empty-

nesters in Bunker Hill condominiums. Latino working-class families in Highland Park and thousands of impoverished immigrants in small houses and apartments around Westlake Park, and in Pico-Union, where the Santa Monica and Harbor freeways meet.

There are only 36,556 registered voters in a population of 224,070. By contrast, the 11th District, on the affluent and politically active Westside, has 118,976 registered voters in a population of 215,705. More than 68% of the 1st District's residents are Latino, while the 11th

District is 88% Anglo.

Those numbers provide graphic evidence of a Los Angeles trend that has disturbed political scientists and those concerned with minority political participation: While the population is becoming more minority and poor, the electorate is becoming more affluent and Anglo. That is because low participation by immigrant-heavy and fast-growing Latinos and Asians is swinging the political balance to predominantly white and affluent areas on the Westside and the San Fernando Valley.



LARRY DAVIS / Los Angeles Times

Councilwoman Gloria Molina in council chambers at City Hall.

A 1987 study for The Times by Caltech political scientist Bruce E. Cain found that 59% of the voters live in the city's whitest and wealthiest districts. These districts contain just 48% of the city's population.

The imbalance in political power was graphically shown in last year's city vote to defeat oil drilling in the Pacific Palisades. Oil drilling lost in both the 1st District and the Westside's 11th District. But 88,881 votes were cast in the 11th and only 20,736 in the 1st.

That point is central to a pamphlet that was being distributed by

Local Elections

Molina registration teams going door to door in Highland Park.

"Our community remains the most under-represented in the city and the state," Molina said in the pamphlet.

"This means that when it comes time to place an unpopular and dangerous project in our district, like prisons or a toxic waste incinerator and oil pipelines in a neighborhood, our neighborhood gets chosen. We simply do not have enough registered voters to fight back at the ballot box."

Outside Allies Needed

She referred to three projects that stirred district residents to intense—but sometimes ineffective—political activity. One was a proposed state prison in East Los Angeles, which was approved despite residents' objections. The second was a proposed incinerator in nearby Vernon, which has been delayed because of opposition. The third was a proposed oil pipeline through the city, which was dropped in the face of public outcry. Significantly, opposition to the incinerator and the pipeline came from several affected areas outside the 1st District. But in the case of the prison, when district opponents

Please see DISTRICT, Page 9

1st CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT

Los Angeles' 1st City Council District, in the heart of central Los Angeles, is the second-poorest of the 15 council districts. Although the district includes fashionable Mt. Washington, the Music Center and Dodger Stadium and the expensive condos and apartments of Bunker Hill, it is defined mostly by its

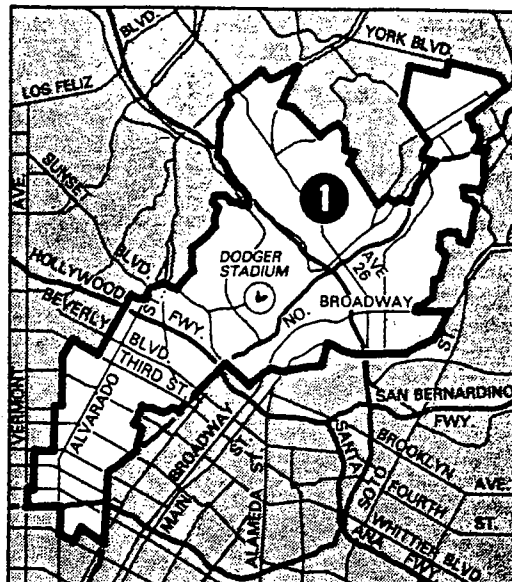
more populous southern part, miles of apartments and converted homes from the Hollywood Freeway south to the Santa Monica Freeway, packed with Latino immigrant families, many of them large, beginning the long climb from deepest poverty.

Population 224,070
Latino Residents 68.4%
Mexican Descent Latinos 51.6%

The poverty of the district can be seen when compared to Los Angeles' wealthiest City Council District, the 11th, which includes the high-priced Westside neighborhoods of Brentwood and Pacific Palisades.

	1st Dist.	11th Dist.
Median household income	\$15,880	\$42,852
Percentage of residents with income lower than \$15,000.	48.3%	19%
White collar workers	31.7%	79.1%
Blue collar, service workers	67.1%	19.8%
Housing units older than 40 years	43.4%	7.3%
Residents with eight years or less of schooling	45.4%	7%

SOURCE: The Times Marketing Research Department



Los Angeles Times

DISTRICT: Political Power Sought

Continued from Page 1
 had no outside allies, they lost.

Low voter participation adds to a problem faced by all Los Angeles neighborhoods: Each council district is divided into two or more legislative districts. That makes it difficult for areas to get help from Sacramento in a time when localities are increasingly dependent on state assistance.

In the high-voting, politically active Westside, the division is not as important. Legislators there are bound together in the political operation headed by Democratic Reps. Henry Waxman and Howard Berman, which has close ties to Westside Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky of the 5th District. Yaroslavsky is an ally of Westside Councilman Marvin Braude of the 11th District.

That all-in-the-family arrangement is not the case with Molina's district. Her district is split among three Assembly districts. But it is not the major portion of any of the legislative districts. Thus political influence is lessened in Sacramento, a condition made worse by the fact that Molina, when in the Assembly, was a foe of Speaker Willie Brown.

Alan Heslop, of the Rose Institute of Claremont McKenna College, said the carving up of the 1st District is an example of how reapportionment leaders divide communities so their own political teams can gain advantage.

"State legislators will do their damndest to split up communi-

ties," Heslop said. "They don't want a leader to come out of that home base."

To make matters worse, the area was not even unified into a council district until the U.S. Justice Department, insisting that the city was disenfranchising Latinos, forced the creation of a Latino district in 1987 to comply with the Voting Rights Act.

Failure to have a council member representing the central section of Los Angeles for many years resulted in neglect to streets, parks and other facilities, Molina said.

Speaking of the neglect in the area, Molina said: "There were times in the last two years when I wouldn't even vote for myself. . . . But little by little, things have improved."

The neglect was clear later that Saturday in the Pico-Union area, where Molina visited a group of men and women engaged in a neighborhood cleanup.

It was on 23rd Street, between Washington and Adams boulevards. The beautiful old buildings on the campus of Mt. St. Mary's College attested to the former elegance of the neighborhood, but most of the buildings in the area were run-down when Raymond Chandler was writing about them in the '30s and '40s. Rents, according to nearby residents, are about \$450 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. Residents say three or four families live in such apartments, with the landlords charging the extra families, living there

illegally, \$50 a person.

Near the college was an oil field, surrounded by a brown-painted cinder block wall covered with the graffiti of the local gangs—Southside 13, Dead End, the Harpys, Little Locos and the new Salvadoran gang, MS. A lawn littered with bottles and fast-food store refuse and a tall chain-link fence were between the wall and the sidewalk.

Last summer, Patsy Carter, a lawyer who owns a five-unit apartment in the neighborhood, got sick of the neglect and went door to door, organizing a group called the 23rd Street Neighbors.

On the recent Saturday, the neighbors had cleaned about six blocks, picking up refuse, painting over graffiti, arranging garbage so it could be picked up.

But, said Carter, they could not remove the graffiti from the oil field wall. The chain link fence kept them out and efforts to get help from the owner, she said, had been unsuccessful.

As the members of the 23rd Street Neighbors chatted after their cleanup, they made it clear that the oil field, surrounded by the ugly wall, was a symbol of their lack of power. Similar installations on the Westside, they noted, were well-tended by oil companies under constant pressure from City Hall.

To Molina, increasing voter registration will increase power, making citywide candidates and legislators more responsive.